



The Interstate at 50

LOWELL RICHARDSON

Creston Resident Construction Engineer, 1957-59

Building roadways 50 years ago was vastly different than our modern methods. Funding for the system was approved in late 1956 and grading in Iowa began in the spring of 1957. Here are the recollections of former DOT employee, Lowell Richardson, who worked on Interstate 35.

"At the time this started, we were working down in Clark County which is not a heavily populated area. I really wondered why we would ever need a four-lane, limited access divided highway. My foresight wasn't very good, obviously..."

Staff sizes X5

I was resident construction engineer down in Creston. At that time there were 24 or 25 construction residencies around the state. Each of us had maybe 15 or 20 employees. When the interstate was coming along, it was pretty easy to see we were going to need a much bigger staff. The administration came up with the idea of getting high school graduates that we could train in Ames in the winter time in an intensive school of math, surveying and that type of thing. Those people would then form the nucleus of the offices that we could have then for the interstate. That was about 1957. I think there were two or three years of this school called the "Roads Scholars." They used assistant resident engineers and survey party chiefs to teach the classes.

During this time, my office expanded from 20-25 people up to 125 on the payroll in the summer with 40-50 people borrowed from other offices. We were working in the area southwest of Des Moines. The survey school ended up really helping out our office and also helped the people in their careers. It really jump-started many careers. They had an opportunity to get into a position that required more skills and education. Even with limited experience, the guys we hired rose to the occasion and got things done. They should be very proud of what they accomplished.

Osceola water supply problems

We had a couple of unusual things that happened in southwest Iowa. One in particular that I think about... we were plowing new ground on about everything. We didn't know the law pertaining to a lot of the things. We were about a mile north of U.S. 34 – right where the casino is now out on the lake. We were going to take the county road over the interstate at that location. The city of Osceola had its main for the only source of water for the city located there.

There was a dispute between the city, state and federal government as to who should pay for moving that water main because it was laid in public right of way along the county road. There was quite a delay in getting that moved because we couldn't go ahead with everything, but we did go ahead and built the berms and embankments on both sides of the interstate to carry the county road over.

Finally, they were getting close to resolving the issue with the water main so they told us to go ahead and build the bridge. We started driving pilings through the embankment. It was about 20-25 feet high and the water line as five or so feet into the embankment. The pilings were angled. About the second piling we drove went right through that 8" water pipe. We shut the entire city of Osceola's water supply down. Luckily they had already started building the new water line, but it was still four or five days that the city was without water.

The day that happened we went into town for lunch and they wouldn't serve us any water... and I don't blame them.

Indirect routes

When we started to open up the interstate in that area, people started using part of it. The terminus down there should have been U.S. 34. We had to get under the railroad in that area and also under U.S. 34. We ended up terminating at a county road. We paved about a mile of the county road to use. For a while interstate traffic was going down I-35, over the county road to down through the city of Osceola and back to U.S. 34. Today that would be impossible to run interstate traffic on a county road. The traffic volumes would be so high that this wouldn't be possible, but back then we didn't have that much traffic.

Mobile labs

We used old school buses for laboratories. We bought up quite a few, and took the seats out and then brought them out on the job. We hated to come in to Ames to pick up a bus and then bring it back in. They were already worn out by the time we got them and many of them didn't have much, if any, brakes left. It was almost risking your life to drive them. They functioned pretty well as labs, but not as vehicles. They also were not tall enough to stand up in them.

Technology was a challenge

Keeping up on quantities was very time consuming. We had hand-crank calculators, but of course no computers. We would hire people that would spend the entire day adding up tickets on those hand crank calculators and adding machines. We hired people for \$185 per month, which I didn't think was too bad for that time. We did have them furnish their own transportation and meals.

We had to struggle with buying right of way. There was a lengthy legal description of the properties. These had to be typed up on manual typewriters with about five carbon copies and there could be no errors. The descriptions would be nearly a page long. I admired the people we had that could do this. We were fortunate to have a man named Bob Day who had been in the Army and worked as a clerk. He was great at that.

Work force

Back then we did not have any women on the job sites.